ARTICLE APPEARED
ON PAGE G-1
WASHINGTON POST
27 May 1984

The Bees or Not the Bees?

By James Conaway

MATTHEW MESELSON, 53, the molecular geneticist and Harvard professor, enjoys lecturing in a gas mask. It tends to rivet the undergraduates, and makes the lethal point about his favorite topic: chemical and biological weapons.

With equal idiosyncrasy, Meselson is now making that same point searching for bee feces from Cambodia to Cambridge, Mass.—little yellow spots that have placed him at the epicenter of one of the most passionate foreign policy debates in years. The debate inflames politicians, divides scientists and strains East-West relations.

"There's one!" Meselson says, pointing to a windshield in the grimy environs of Harvard yard. He scrapes off the waxy substance with a fingernail. "That's definitely a bee spot. You see them every spring, when the bees begin to fly."

He wears the requisite Ivy League striped tie and tweed jacket, but he has the cachet, at the moment, of a balding Indiana Jones home from the hot countries.

He returned from Thailand in March, freshly showered, he said, with bee feces. He called a press conference to announce that it is a mistake to identify yellow rain as an agent of chemical warfare. "It is in fact," Meselson said, "the feces of wild honeybees."

The uproar that announcement caused has yet to subside. The government has insisted that chemical agents are being used by the Soviets and their allies, in violation of international accord, and that yellow rain is one of them.

Says Meselson: "You're not supposed to contradict the secretary of state or the president. We expected to be criticized."

"KG-Bees," one of Meselson's more jocular colleagues told him, although Harvard's finest seem to be solidly behind him.

Someone calls out to Meselson, "I hear you've been rained on, Matt."

He replies: "I've had a bath."

He is an inveterate doubter of official U.S. government pronouncements on chemical warfare, and for two years has been shut out of the top-secret State Department briefings that he enjoyed for almost two decades. Since then, he has taken on his government more or less singlehandedly, if you don't consider the grants, including $250,000 from the MacArthur Foundation.

"I'm a born skeptic," he says. "When I see a rock, I want to turn it over."

His academic credentials are matched by a political acumen uncommon in the realm of pure science. Meselson contributed significantly to the 1972 Geneva Convention banning chemical warfare; he is so loath to admit that chemicals are being used to kill combatants anywhere in violation of that convention that he suggests Iranians on the Iraqi front are gassing *themselves*.

The issue has become a kind of entomological Dreyfus case—you may choose sides according to your politics, rather than the evidence. Yellow rain equals right-wing, militant anti-communism; bee feces equals left-wing disdain of the American intelligence network. Meanwhile, people die of bizarre, ghastly maladies in obscure corners of the global battlefield.

"This is not an academic exercise, but a human tragedy," says a State Department spokesman involved in arms control. He disdains Meselson's theory, but will not say so for the record, so acrimonious is the debate over bee feces. "Matt likes the public rostrum, he likes to see himself in print. We all have our egos to maintain, but his point of view has been given exposure beyond its worth."

Meselson does not contend that the symptoms—hemorrhaging, lesions, rampant sores—are necessarily caused by bees, although he says the feces could possibly sustain deadly poisons that thrive on certain fungi. He postulates instead that people are suffering from exposure to toxins that occur naturally—in moldy grain, say.

The disorders, Meselson says, are then erroneously attributed to yellow spots observed on leaves, skin, even windshields.

Divorced with two daughters, Meselson is the grandson of a Russian emigrant and the son of a salesman of various commodities. He moved with his family from Denver to Los Angeles when he was a small child. By fourth grade he had a lab in his basement. His family encouraged his interest in chemistry, but discouraged his curiosity about politics. "If I asked why the president did something," Meselson says, "my uncle would say, 'Now don't you worry about that, Matt.' "

He earned an undergraduate degree at the University of Chicago and a doctorate at the California Institute of Technology, which he describes as "the place where modern genetics started . . . Geneticists are all kids, full of enthusiasm." Ultimately, his work in molecular genetics would lead to a nomination for a Nobel Prize, and one of his experiments in genetics is standard fare in high school textbooks.

But his passion is weapons. While doing research at Cal Tech, Meselson accepted a post as science adviser to the Kennedy administration because "I thought it was a chance to see behind the mirror" of politics. His field was to be nuclear warfare, but became chemical and biological warfare (CBW) after his predecessor in the post committed suicide.